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ABSTRACT

Children in today's society must function in many environments. The home, family, school, neighborhood, peers, and society generally shape our children for the future. Teachers, partners of this cyclical challenge, have to be prepared to help students meet the challenges of the world 2000. Teachers can learn to meet this goal by creating learning communities through technology and sound teacher preparation programs. A program that allows preservice and inservice teachers to use online communication to enhance their personal growth is the beginning of an online community. The availability of synchronous and asynchronous activity through the use of WebBoard is demonstrated and explained in this paper. Samples of assignments, solutions to problems teachers faced online, and ideas for future assignments are discussed. (Author/MES)

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Online Communication-Building Learning Communities

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Abstract: Children in today's society must function in many environments. The home, family, school, neighborhood, peers, and society generally shape our children for the future. Teachers, partners of this cyclical challenge, have to be prepared to help students meet the challenges of the world 2000. Teachers can learn to meet this goal by creating learning communities through technology and sound teacher preparation programs. A program that allows preservice and inservice teachers to use online communication to enhance their personal growth is the beginning of an online community. The availability of synchronous and asynchronous activity, through the use of WebBoard, is demonstrated and explained in this paper. Samples of assignments, solutions to problems teachers faced online, and ideas for future assignments will be discussed.

Introduction

Communication, defined loosely as an exchange of information, is essential to both preservice and inservice teachers. Without effective communication skills, a preservice teacher may quickly leave the profession or an inservice teacher may have the anxiety of being lost in a "vacuum". Feelings of isolation may come from being in a classroom with no one to turn to, but the students who sit before them daily. Communication with colleagues at the school, during the instructional hours, is often limited to handling and discussing problems, which may increase feelings of isolation and frustration, as educators do not have the opportunity to look at their situations from a larger perspective, and to realize that their problems are often unique – and that other educators may have found some solutions. The opening of communication channels with the outside world, often enabled through the latest technology, may help educators feel a part of the larger professional community of educators.

The Computer and Communication

Within the past twenty years the computer has become a facilitator for managing different types of communication for educators. It has literally become the bridge for educators with the community. For example, by using the Internet, both preservice and inservice teachers communicate with all kinds of businesses such as banks, retail stores, airlines, and others through email. They have learned to access numerous databases to obtain the latest weather reports, stock market information, news stories, or medical information for the classroom. The classrooms have become more student centered, collaborative, and interactive by the use of telecommunication networking. (Kellough & Kellough, 1998) The students learn new inquiry and analytical skills in stimulating environments, increasing their awareness of their role as world citizens. (Cohen, 1994) The computer and the teacher become facilitators in the classroom. Now the challenge becomes how to connect them more with fellow educators so the feeling of isolation is dismissed.

Learning and producing learners is a lifelong endeavor for a teacher. Participating in a teacher preparation program that emphasizes technological skills for the classroom and the world can help teachers enhance their

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professional growth. When preservice and inservice teachers know that they can communicate freely with university instructors and each other on line, the base of the learning community broadens. Basic skills start in the university class where preservice and inservice teachers receive training using email, mailing list, and bulletin boards. Demonstrations of how to use chat rooms to review for test, to seek advice from colleagues or educator – supervisors, to discuss research, and to complete many other tasks become the objective. This kind of communication leads to self-inquiry and more knowledge of the teaching profession. A profession that produces better-prepared and knowledgeable personnel who lead their students one step further into a technological society is a definite benefit.

One University's Program

The mission of our teacher preparation program is to provide, through a collaborative commitment, relevant field-based teacher education and staff development programs that integrate research supported, innovative teaching and assessment practices with technology so that educators share a common vision of improving the learning and achievement of all students. This collaboration has resulted in partners integrating technology with the best teaching practices in a more effective manner. The placement of technology in the classrooms rather than labs and providing ongoing staff development and support in the public school has been the heart of the program. This allows for multiple levels of communication. For example, professors and preservice teachers have used email for basic communication while demonstrating their content mastery through multimedia presentations. This starts the process of moving professionals into the 21st century.

Preservice Teachers and Email

On the university campus preservice teachers use email to send their weekly journals. These reflective journals demonstrate their teaching activities and their observations of the school environment. Preservice teachers also discuss classroom problems and professors send back responses in the form of advice. A sample entry follows:

> Dr. Justice:
>
> With Halloween coming last Saturday we did a lot of activities directed at the holiday in my LIFE class. By doing these projects the students met most of their objectives including working cooperatively/sharing space and following functional commands. These were a lot of fun for the students and gave me the opportunity to observe and work with the students on new and alternative activities. We also included the regular activities and lessons that we do each week. Next week we will wrap up the six weeks by reviewing. This is the first six weeks we have done colors fully and it will be interesting to see how much retention the students will have after this period of time.
>
> **We are going on a field trip during the A.M. (9-11) on Tues., Nov. 3.
>
> Health is going pretty well. I still get a little discouraged; having such a big class sometimes presents behavior problems. I am working on disciplining and feel I have a much better idea about it now that we have discussed what causes misbehaviors and ways to address them. As far as instruction, I have had a much more student-centered teaching environment and the test grades this time were somewhat improved so I will continue to have the students be involved in the instruction like we discussed. With the six weeks wrapping up I am worried about a couple of low grades but I have discussed this with my mentor and the students involved. We are working toward having a successful six weeks for everyone.

The response of the professor:

> L___,
> I enjoyed both of your classes. The students in the LIFE class are doing fine. They are learning a lot. Let me know the date of the field trip.

Is next week the end of the six weeks? What is the exam schedule? How many students are not doing well? What have you done to provide assistance?
Continue to lecture less and let the students do more of the work. This takes some thinking and arranging. Make it fun and relevant! Make sure that you call on everyone in the class. Hopefully, I can give you more advice on Monday.
See you Monday!!!!
Madeline Justice

This type of email shows the preservice teacher making thoughtful decisions in the classroom.

Preservice Teacher and the WebBoard

Additional communication was set up by the use of a WebBoard. This was to get students familiar with a different type of communication. The professor showed students how to register on the WebBoard system and how to respond to a posted assignment. On the WebBoard, six rooms were set up and three students were assigned to a room to answer a review question over a reading assignment. A sample of a posted assignment with student responses is below:

Dr. Justice's Online Office (0)
Rm 1 (5, 5 New)
Rm 2 (5, 5 New)
Rm 3 (3, 3 New)
Rm 4 (3, 3 New)
Rm 5 (5, 5 New)
Rm 6 (4, 4 New)

Classroom Management (1 of 1), Read 11 times
Conf Rm 2
From: Dr.Justice. (madeline_justice@tamu-commerce.edu)
Date: Sunday, October 11, 1998 03:31 PM

Give at least three different examples of a student wanting attention in the classroom. Discuss the many ways in which you would solve each problem. Each member in this room should give an example and solutions to the problems.

The preservice teachers' reflections after being in the chat room:

Topic: Classroom Management Reflection (1 of 1), Read 11 times
Conf: Rm 2
From: D C (_____@juno.com)
Date: Monday, October 12, 1998 08:47 AM

We talked about students that seek attention in the classroom. We covered many of the methods for handling this situation. Many of the methods that we covered came from the book, and we also discussed experiences in the classroom.

The chat room was pretty fun, and it seemed like it could be a very useful tool if you could find a chat room on a topic that you needed to discuss with someone maybe to get another opinion, or maybe a place to vent frustrations.

Another sample message on the same topic follows:

Conf: Rm 6
From: L L (_____@_____.tamu-commerce.edu)
Date: Monday, October 12, 1998 08:47 AM

E M and I discussed the four goals of misbehavior in the classroom. What some examples of these might include and how it might be good to deal with them. I enjoyed the chat room because it was more like a discussion than a question-answer set-up. It was nice to talk about the question and get help and another person's viewpoint.
In the next session students were shown how to use web board to communicate with each other.

They were shown how to enter a chat room, chat about their experience in the schools, and again summarize their experience by posting a message to the professor. A sample follows:

Date: Monday, October 26, 1998 09:22 AM

This is from A I. The last couple of weeks have been great. I had some reservations about the shift to regular history but it has been great. I enjoy the format of the American history class and most of my classes are great. Eighth period is a little loud but I think they are basically good students and generally bright, I think. Next week will be great. I am more confident with my lectures and ability in front of the class.
A I

A sample chat by student teachers to the past week's experience went like this:

10/12/98 08:20

E S: Hi D___ and S____
D. C.: Hi! Everyone!
D. C.: How are your classes going?
E S: Pretty Good. Where's S____?
D. C.: I have one student that had decided to cuss a student from across the room. My response was to write a referral on her. Would you do the same? I haven't heard from S____, yet.
E S: I probably would have done the same. That way all the other students could see that this was a major offense and it would not be tolerated. E___ S____: I haven't had anything quite that severe yet. Thank goodness
E S: Hey S_____
D. C.: Friday, the same student asked if we could leave class two minutes early. I told her no, of course. She waited a few minutes, then asked again. My response was the same. Hi, S____!
D. C.: How are your students acting when Dr. Justice observes you? S____ S_____: Hello, this is S_____, copy?
D. C.: Copy.
E S: Dr. Bennett observes me. They usually act pretty well. He comes and observes one of my....

This way preservice teachers are able to get quick responses and also feel that they are not the only ones having problems. It is always an eye opening experience for the preservice teachers to talk to someone who is going through the same or different experiences. They use each other as sounding boards and get a sense of relief that helps them to grow. After this experience, a student sent the following email message to the professor from his computer at home.

Date: Sun, 25 Oct 1998 18:25:10 -0600 (CST)
From: J F S <___@___.tamu-commerce.edu>
To: Madeline_Justice@tamu-commerce.edu
Subject: Re: Welcome to Dr. Justice's WebBoard!

Dr. Justice,

I really had fun using the web board it was quite interesting. Thank you for the experience maybe in future I will the become more comfortable with the board. Thanks again!

Preservice Teachers and the Professor

Email is an excellent way of communicating, but the students and professor wanted to engage in a conversation with students from their own environment, home or the classroom. This communication was from the home. A distance of forty-eight miles was between them. Using the web board both parties (professor and student) went online. They were able to chat for an hour about what the professor had observed in the classroom. On that particular night the travel of communication was slow, but effective and beneficial. The professor talked classroom observations and the preservice asked for advice in managing several of the students. The preservice teacher took the advice and incorporated several strategies discussed in the online chat.

The Preservice Teachers Communicating with Inservice Teachers from the University

Preservice and Inservice teachers were able to communicate about online resources. Inservice teachers in graduate classes had created online resource pages, and the preservice teachers had the opportunity to visit and critique them. This provided the preservice teachers with a chance to participate in the professional educational community, as they provided feedback to veteran teachers. As students sent their comments to teachers, and the teachers responded, it helped these future teachers consider what is needed in the classroom, and maybe some strategies to accomplish this. This activity reinforced the importance of getting and giving support.

Another activity, along the same lines, required students to visit web sites of schools around the United States. Each student selected a school to visit, and then chose a faculty member to write to. The message included an introduction from the preservice teacher, and a question about an area of concern related to classroom management. This opened up the doors to broadening the perspectives of our preservice teachers about schools around the country, as well as about some possible job openings. These communication activities gave the students a chance to develop skills that will hopefully encourage them, in the future, to find other professionals in their teaching fields from whom to seek support.

Preservice Teacher s Communicating with Other Professionals Around the World

In another class preservice teachers were asked to contact other schools in and outside the United States. They were to send a letters of introduction and ask questions of concern about their classrooms. A response to the student follows:

> From: Charles Campbell Secondary School <_____@_____.edu.au>
> To: _____@koyote.com
> Subject: Re: School Info
> Date: Friday, November 27, 1998 12:02 AM
>
> At 08:33 AM 11/24/98 -0600, you wrote:
> >Hello.
> >My name is E____ M____, and I am a recent graduate of Texas A&M University at Commerce. I >plan to teach English on the secondary level. I would like to hear about your English Department >and your community. I have always wanted to go to Australia, so I am extremely interested in your >school. Thank you for your time.
>
> Dear E____,
>
> Thanks for your note. It is a huge task to do as you requested, and as we are at the end of our school year and into exam marking. I am unable to tell you very much. English here is very interesting, as we do a balance of activities, from classic to popular literature, and media and everyday texts, in addition to a wide variety of writing about these texts and of a more general and creative nature. Speaking and Listening tasks are also important. Students also do independent reading and writing

tasks. We have recently moved towards a national curriculum although not all states embrace the move. The aim is to establish some uniformity of curriculum and assessment levels.

I love English as we can choose our texts and tasks from a huge range of possibilities, so it is easier to interest students than it was in the days of set texts. Our school is well resourced and much better than many schools as it was recently refurbished and is a bit of a showpiece.

This school is a very diverse one. We have a large number of Italian students - now 3rd or 4th generation, and also many Asian students and some from the Middle East. It is a suburban area where most people live comfortably and have high regard for education. I am not going to be here next year, as I am moving to a school nearer my home. I will no longer have email, but if you want to contact me at all, my address is 1B Sylvia Court, Coromandel Valley, South Australia. 5051.

Will you look for a teaching exchange? I did one last year to Ontario in Canada and lived near Niagara Falls, an interesting experience! Good luck with your ambitions. Our email is off from Monday due to the upgrading of the system, so don't reply. We finish school on Dec 18th for 5 weeks and our summer vacation - I am going to New Zealand.

Conclusions

It is very important that a preservice and inservice teacher communicate with professionals in and outside of the school. If they seek advice in the area of classroom tips, then they are engaging in growth. If they are growing by the use of technology, they are able to encourage their students to do the same, and therefore become a part of the world community.

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